

XXIII. A Closer Look at Spiritual Gifts

November 12/14, 2013

1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-31a
cp. Rom.12:6-8; Eph.4:11; 1 Pe. 4:9-11

Aim: To learn which spiritual gifts are listed in the Scriptures and understand which still continue and which have ceased.

A. Introducing Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:27)

²⁷*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

A careful study of Paul's treatment of this vital subject makes it quite clear he was far more concerned with the principles behind the gifts than with the gifts themselves. We have isolated the following major principles: 1) there is great diversity in the Spirit's giving (12:4-6); 2) all gifts are for the good of the church (12:7); 3) the Spirit decides who gets what gifts (12:11, 18); and 4) the fact that there is a diversity of gifts doesn't threaten the unity of the church (12:12-26).

To the extent that the harmony and well-being of our physical bodies is central to our continuing existence, to the same degree these priorities apply to the spiritual body of Christ. Every believer really does belong. Each one counts and needs to contribute. But what we contribute depends entirely on God's appointment (v. 28a). The term 'appointed' in verse 28a basically means to set or place, but is often used to indicate official appointment to an office.

B. Examining Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28)

⁸*For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.... ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.*

The New Testament contains several lists of the categories of spiritual gifts, one of which is in I Corinthians 12:8-10, 28 (see also Rom 12:6-8; cp. 1 Peter 4:11). Bible scholars do not agree on the exact number and distinction of kinds of gifts. Because the scriptural lists are not identical, it seems clear that God did not intend to give His church either a rigid or precise and exhaustive compilation, but rather general categories. One should be careful not to overdefine the gifts.

Perhaps the one thing that leaps out and catches our attention is the lack of precision we find in what Paul says about the gifts. He gives two lists of gifts in this one chapter and the two lists are quite different. Some of the gifts he mentions in the first part of the chapter, he ignores in the last part; he mentions gifts in the last part of the chapter he didn't mention in the first part.

When we begin to compare Paul's two lists here with the other three lists of gifts in the New Testament (Rom. 12:6-8; Eph. 4:7-11; 1 Pe. 4:7-11), we find much the same thing. Gifts that appear in one list are nowhere to be found in the other lists. No matter where we look, we find a casualness and almost a carelessness about listing the gifts. Why? The answer should be quite obvious. Paul and Peter the only two men who gave us lists of the gifts, wanted to avoid the very

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thing so many of us are guilty of: adopting a mechanical rigid approach on this matter. Regarding the gifts mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians, we must remember that this is a Corinthian list, not an exhaustive list.

Some look at the lists of the gifts and immediately say all the gifts have ceased, that they were all temporary provisions for the early church alone. Others look at the very same lists and say none of the gifts have ceased, and the only reason we don't see them today is the church's unwillingness to claim them in faith. Those who hold this view strongly insist that Scripture nowhere says the gifts will cease, but it should also be pointed out that neither does Scripture say all gifts will continue. Both of these approaches are of the rigid, mechanical sort and ultimately constitute a denial of one of the major principles Paul clearly laid down: the sovereignty of the Spirit. Both approaches essentially put the Spirit of God in a straitjacket. One says He must give all the same gifts today as He did then, while the other says He must not give any of the same gifts.

What then is the true position? Close adherence to the sovereignty of the Spirit will drive us to conclude some of the gifts have ceased while others have not. If the Spirit is sovereign, He has the freedom to withdraw some gifts and to continue to give others. Furthermore, if the Spirit is sovereign in the giving of gifts, we should expect Him to be giving gifts today that He didn't necessarily give in the days of the early church. The tricky part, of course, is determining which of the gifts have ceased and which haven't.

A thorough examination will yield the truth that spiritual gifts fill two major purposes: the permanent gifts edify the church and the temporary gifts are signs to confirm the Word of God. God will continue to give the permanent gifts to believers for the duration of the church age, and those gifts are to be ministered by His people at all times in the life of the church. Those gifts include first the speaking or verbal gifts and second, the serving or non-verbal gifts. The temporary sign gifts were limited to the apostolic age and therefore ceased after that time. The purpose of temporary sign gifts was to authenticate the apostolic message as the Word of God, until the time when the Scriptures were completed and became self-authenticating.

In verses 8-10 and 28 Paul mentions some of those gifts that illustrate the 'varieties' he spoke of in verse 4. These lists include both permanent and temporary gifts, and are only representative of the varieties, as seen from the fact that additional gifts are mentioned in the other gift list in the New Testament. The apostle does not explain the functions of the particular gifts here. His point is to illustrate the variety in kinds of gifts and to emphasize the common source of the gifts.

In an attempt to organize/categorize these gifts, the following table is suggested, where gifted offices are indicated in orange, word gifts in blue, servant gifts in purple, and sign gifts in green:

1 Cor. 12:8-10	1 Cor. 12:28	Rom. 12:6-8	Eph. 4:11	1 Pe. 4:11
word of wisdom	apostles	prophecy	apostles	Hospitality
word of knowledge	prophets	service	prophets	Speak oracles
faith	teachers	teaching	evangelists	Serves
gifts of healing	miracles	exhortation	pastors-teachers	
miracles	gifts of healing	generosity		
prophecy	helps	leadership		
discernment	administration	mercy		
tongue speaking	tongue speaking			
tongue interpreting				

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Note that of all the gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12 and the other passages above, our Lord Jesus Christ exercised all of them during His earthly ministry except the gifts related to tongues.

1. Gifted Offices (12:28; cp. Eph. 4:11)

After Jesus ascended into heaven in triumph and sat at the right hand of God, perhaps the first act of the new King was Pentecost (Acts 2), when He poured out His Holy Spirit to gift every member of the church. Christ's gifts to His church (also called the gifts of the Spirit) are listed in four separate chapters of the New Testament and in one of those chapters in two places. So there are five lists in all (1 Cor. 12:8-10; 28-30; Rom. 12:6-8; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pe. 4:11). In all there may be nineteen or twenty gifts mentioned, but this is not an absolute figure.

In Ephesians 4:11, Paul talks about one aspect only of Christian work – the founding of a local church. There are four groups of gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers. Pastors and teachers are linked by a different word 'and' than between the others. In 1 Corinthians 12:28, the gifted offices of apostles, prophets, and teachers (comparable to pastor-teachers) are listed in order of priority or in a hierarchy of importance (first, second, third).

a) *Apostles and Prophets*

Apostles and prophets had three basic responsibilities: 1) to lay the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20); to receive and declare the revelation of God's Word (Acts 11:28; 21:10-11; Eph. 3:5); and 3) to give confirmation of that Word through 'signs and wonders and miracles' (2 Cor. 12:12; cp. Acts 8:6-7; Heb. 2:3-4).

(1) Apostles

The apostles were of first importance since they were the foundation gift of God to His church, the channels of divine revelation to the people before the Scriptures were written, and the means by which that truth was recorded. The prophets and teachers carried on their ministry, passing on sound doctrine and relating it to their hearer's lives, exhorting, encouraging, and rebuking. Apostles belong to that brief generation following Jesus. After that, apostleship in persons ceased but was transferred to the canonical texts of the New Testament.

The first of the gifted men in the New Testament church were the apostles, of whom Jesus Christ Himself is the foremost (Heb. 3:1). The basic meaning of 'apostle' (*apostolos*) is simply that of one sent on a mission. The qualifications for that apostleship were having been chosen directly by Christ and having witnessed the resurrection (Mk. 3:13; Acts 1:22-24). It is not possible therefore, as some claim, for there to be apostles in the church today. Some have observed that the apostles were like delegates to a constitutional convention. When the convention is over, the position ceases. When the New Testament was completed, the office of apostle ceased.

An apostle is an authoritative teacher and interpreter of the Christian faith, appointed to this task by the risen Christ whom he has seen personally (cp. 1 Cor. 9:1-2). These were those individuals chosen by Christ to be the foundation stones of the church and as such ceased to exist when the original apostles died.

(2) Prophets

'Prophets' were also appointed by God (1 Cor. 12:28) as specially gifted men, and differ from those believers who have the gift of prophecy (12:10). Not all such believers could be called prophets. It seems that the office of prophet was exclusively for work within a local

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congregation, whereas that of apostleship was a much broader ministry, not confined to any area. The prophets sometimes spoke revelation from God (Acts 11:21-28) and sometimes simply expounded revelation already given (as implied in Acts 13:1, where they are connected with teachers). They always spoke for God but did not always give a newly revealed message from God.

The prophets were second to the apostles. Like the apostles, however, their office ceased with the completion of the New Testament, just as the Old Testament prophets disappeared when that testament was completed. Once the foundation was laid (Eph. 2:20), the work of the apostles and prophets was finished. The work of interpreting and proclaiming the now-written Word was taken over by evangelists, pastor-teachers, and teachers. The purpose of apostles was to equip the church with right doctrine; the purpose of evangelists, pastor-teachers, and teachers is to equip the church for effective ministry.

Prophets are people who receive new revelation directly from God and faithfully transmit it to the church. These were closely linked with the apostles and, among other activities, helped write the New Testament. Since the Bible is complete, there are not any prophets today.

Paul tells the Ephesians the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). If we were to go out and start building a house, we would lay a foundation, but there would be a definite end to it. A builder doesn't just continue to lay the foundation; he builds on top of a foundation that is complete and finished.

The apostles and the prophets occupied a unique place in God's economy in that they were recipients of new revelation from God. While the New Testament was being written, God directed and guided the church by revealing His truth to the apostles and prophets. When Scripture was complete, their work was done and we now have embodied the truth we need.

b) Evangelists

Unlike the first two gifts, the gift of evangelism has not ceased, but it is sad that in the period of church history there have been only a few who are so gifted. An evangelist is one who possesses a special ability to communicate the gospel of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ. 'Evangel' means 'gospel, so we could translate 'evangelist' as 'gospeller.' Evangelists are needed to keep on defining the true gospel in the face of subtle enemies who would destroy it. Timothy was such an evangelist and Paul sent him to ward off false teachers in Ephesus, as well as in other churches he had founded (*cp.* 2 Tim. 4:5). Philip was also called an evangelist (Acts 21:8). The term could also describe church planters who develop new churches or missionaries. This gift of evangelism is not limited to those who are 'professionals' but could be given to anyone who can communicate the gospel extremely effectively.

c) Pastors and Teachers

The third office listed in 1 Cor. 12:28 is that of 'teacher,' which may be the same as that of pastor-teacher (see Eph. 4:11; Acts 13:1). John MacArthur is inclined to consider them as being separate. The teacher not only has the gift of teaching but God's calling to teach. All who have the office of teaching also have the gift of teaching, but not everyone with the gift has the office.

The fourth type of leader is the person who is both a pastor and a teacher (the terms are linked together as one individual in Ephesians 4:11). These are the elders of the local church. Pastor-teachers were gifted to be responsible for the day-to-day building up of the church. The word 'pastor' means 'shepherd' and refers to one who has pastoral oversight of others. Christ sends

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certain men to be His under-shepherds. Their responsibility is to tend His sheep (*cp.* Heb. 13:20; 1 Pe. 5:4). Their supreme task is to lead them into good pasture and to nourish them, all the time protecting them from what might harm them. How are spiritual sheep fed? By the Word of God, of course. Every pastor must be ‘an apt teacher’ (1 Tim. 3:2; *cp.* Titus 1:9). This explains why ‘pastor and teachers’ are one and the same people – they are to come alongside of another and disciple them.

Teachers are the staple of ongoing Christianity. The teacher ‘pastors’ the congregation as he teaches the faith, whether to the new convert or to the long-term member.

2. Word Gifts (12:8; *cp.* Rom. 12:7)

These gifts include a word of wisdom and a word of knowledge from 1 Corinthians 12:8 and teaching from Romans 12:7 (*cp.* the office of teaching in 1 Cor. 12:28 and pastor-teacher in Eph. 4:11).

Paul begins his lists in both 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 and 12:28 with word-related gifts, because word ministry is always the apostle’s primary concern. Word gifts always were, and still are, essential for the health and growth of the churches.

a) *Word of Wisdom & Word of Knowledge*

The ‘word of wisdom’ (*logos sophias*) and the ‘word of knowledge’ (*logos gnōseōs*) probably describe those whose gift is to teach the gospel, bringing the church wisdom and knowledge of God.

The ‘word of wisdom’ is a broad term. The use of *logos* indicates this is a speaking ability. In the New Testament, ‘wisdom’ (*sophia*) is used most often to refer to the ability to understand God’s will and apply it obediently. Wisdom, then, refers basically to applying truths discovered, to the ability to make skillful and practical application of the truth to life situations. Communicating wisdom is the function of the expositor, who draws not only from his own study of Scripture but from the many insights and interpretations of commentators and other Bible scholars. It is also the ability a counselor must have in order to apply God’s truth to the questions and problems brought to him.

The ‘word of knowledge’ is also a broad term, which basically refers to perceiving and understanding the truths of God’s Word. It is especially the gift of communicating insight into the mysteries of His revelation, those truths that could not be known apart from God’s revelation. God gives certain of His saints a special ability to study His Word and discover the full meaning of the text and context, of individual words and phrases, and of related passages and truths, and thereby help provide understanding for others. The gift of knowledge is the capability of grasping the meaning of God’s revelation, which is mystery to the natural mind. That gift is foundational for all Christian teaching and preaching, as well as for the proper exercise of counseling, leadership, wisdom, and all other ministries and gifts. Since the closing of the canon, this gift has not involved the receiving of new truth but only understanding of truth previously revealed.

The Spirit given *logos* is the subject of Paul’s comment: what some Corinthians were being told by God, they had to proclaim to the church. Perhaps these *charismata* were nearly equivalent in that some spoke with ‘wisdom’ and others with ‘knowledge,’ the joint theme being Christ. Perhaps the former might have been the capacity to declare ‘the word of the cross’ (1:18), in

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contrast to the stale wisdom of the world (cp. 2:5, 6, 13). A ‘word of knowledge’ might have been a teaching ability, the expression being formulated to denigrate the Corinthians’ foolish sense of superiority (cp. 8:1-2, 7).

We know that the word of wisdom is the preaching of the cross (1:24) and that the knowledge of Christ and His example (10:32-11:1) is at the heart of the apostle’s concern for them. The ‘word of wisdom’ is probably the ability to see through a particular problem and to shed light on what the church is to do about it. The ‘word of knowledge’ may very well be the capacity to grasp and communicate God’s Word in a special way.

b) Teaching

The gift of ‘teaching’ is the ability to explain the Word of God so others can understand it. The teacher, of course, is one in whom we would also expect to find the gift of knowledge.

3. Servant Gifts (12:9, 28; cp. Rom. 12:7-8; 1 Pe. 4:9-11)

These gifts include faith, helps (or service), administration (or leadership), exhortation, generosity, mercy, and hospitality. These gifts all seem to exist in the church today.

a) Faith

The gift of ‘faith’ should not be confused with saving faith. The latter is something all Christians have. Verse 9 indicates that there is a special gift of faith given to some, to those, perhaps, who are called to serve God in unusually demanding circumstances. The gift of faith is probably the ability to trust God’s promises in what seems to be an impossible dilemma.

This sovereign, Spirit-given ‘faith’ obviously is distinct from saving faith or the daily faith by which every believer lives. This faith has to do with an intensive ability to trust God in difficult and demanding ways. It is the ability to trust Him in the face of overwhelming obstacles and human impossibilities. The gift of faith is primarily expressed toward God through prayer, appealing to and trusting God to do that which is beyond His normal provision. Those with the gift of faith have a special ability to lay claim on the promises of God.

b) Helps (or Service)

The gift of ‘helps’ is the ability to serve and support others. Those with this gift usually serve behind the scenes and go largely unnoticed.

The gift of ‘helps’ is a gift for service in the broadest sense of helping and supporting others in day-by-day, often unnoticed ways. It is the same gift as that of serving (Rom. 12:7), though another Greek word is used in that text. ‘Helps’ (*antilēmpsis*) is an especially beautiful word, meaning to take the burden off someone else and place it on oneself. That gift doubtlessly is one of the most widely distributed of any, and is a gift that is immeasurably important in supporting those who minister other gifts.

‘Helping,’ by which Paul means ‘helping others,’ is a means of great blessing to fellow-members in some kind of trouble. The gifts of companionship to the lonely and pre-cooked casseroles for a family in need are just a couple of practical examples of helping others. Implied in ‘helping’ is a sensitive awareness of others, especially in times of duress.

The gift of helps is not glamorous or showy and, as in the Corinthian church, often is not highly prized or appreciated. But it is God’s gift, and its faithful ministry is highly prized by Him and by any leader who knows the value of supporting people behind the scenes.

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c) Administrations (or Leadership)

The gift of ‘administrations’ or ‘government’ is the gift of leadership. This is a gift that only some have. It is, however, critical for the effective operation of a local church, a denomination, or organization. Such a ministry must not be looked down upon by more spiritual believers.

The gift of ‘administrations’ is the gift of leadership. The term comes from *kubernēsis*, literally meaning ‘to steer or pilot’ a ship, and is so used in Acts 27:11. It refers to one who keeps a ship, or a church, on course toward its proper destination.

d) Exhortation, Generosity, Mercy, Hospitality

These gifts are not mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians. The first three are listed by Paul in Romans chapter 12 and the last one is mentioned by Peter in 1 Peter chapter 4.

4. Sign Gifts (12:9-10, 28; cp. Rom. 12:6; 1 Pe. 4:11)

These gifts include gifts of healing and miracles, prophecy and discerning spirits, and tongues speaking and interpreting. These gifts were given as temporary signs of authenticity during the foundation of the church. These gifts have ceased (MacArthur and Barnett contend that a form of prophecy continues).

a) Miracles and Healings

(1) Miracles

The word ‘miracles’ in verse 10 has the same root as the word translated ‘empowers’ in verse 6 and linked with the familiar New Testament term *dunamis*, with its basic meaning of ‘ability,’ the successful completion of a task. This gift appears to have been distinct from healing miracles, which was a separate gift.

‘The effecting of miracles’ is a temporary sign gift. A miracle is a supernatural intrusion into the natural world and its natural laws, explainable only by divine intervention. God often leads us, helps us, or warns us by working through other Christians, through ordinary circumstances, or through natural laws. Those are supernatural workings of providence by God, but they are not miracles. A miracle is an act of God that is contrary to the ordinary working and laws of nature, an act that only He could accomplish by overruling nature and that could not otherwise occur through any circumstances. Those signs accompanied God’s Word only so long as He was revealing the Word. When revelation stopped, the sign gifts stopped.

Regarding the working of miracles, some would have us believe miracles happened every single day in the lives of the Bible heroes and that they should be happening with the same frequency to us. However, a miracle is, by definition, something that is extraordinary. If miracles happened every day they would be ordinary and would, therefore, not be miracles.

A careful study of the miracles that did take place in the Bible reveals that, far from happening all the time, they actually occurred in four clusters: during the time of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, during the time of Judah’s captivity in Babylon, and during the ministries of our Lord and the apostles. It should be noted that each of these eras was a time when God was giving new revelation. While a lot of ground is covered by those four eras, there is still a gigantic amount of time in which miracles didn’t take place.

Furthermore, since the gift of miracles so closely adhered to the office of apostle (2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4), it is only logical to expect it to cease at the same time the office ceased.

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(2) Healings

‘Gifts of healing’ is literally ‘cures,’ and the plural is very important. It helps us to understand that there is not *a* gift of healing that is exercised indiscriminately by an individual. Rather, there are actual cases of healings or cures, carried out by God through His chosen human agents, perhaps, as in James 5:14 through prayer and anointing with oil. Paul’s words regarding the gifts of healing are a good reason to regard medical care as a high calling for Christians.

It is interesting to note that ‘gifts’ here is plural; Paul is speaking of categories of giftedness in which there may be great variety. The word ‘healing’ also is plural in the Greek (*iamatōn*), emphasizing the many kinds of afflictions that need healing. God may still heal directly and miraculously today, in response to the faithful prayers of His children. But no Christian today has the gifts of healings. This is apparent because no one today can heal as did Jesus and the apostles—who with a word or touch instantaneously and totally healed all who came to them, and who raised the dead. The gifts of healings, like the other sign gifts, were temporary, given to the church for authenticating the apostolic message as the Word of God. Medical work has long been a God-blessed part of Christian service. But God’s healing work, whether through medicine or miracle, is no longer an authenticating sign, and He no longer endows His church with such gifts. A Christian today has the right to ask God for the healing of any illness. God may choose to heal in order to accomplish some purpose of His and to show His glory, but He is under no obligation to heal.

Healings, of course, constituted a good number of the miracles that took place in the Bible. So if we conclude the gift of miracles has ceased, we are almost bound to conclude healings have ceased as well. This is not to say, of course, that God never heals anybody today, but rather that He heals through medical processes and not through the giving of a miraculous gift to someone in the church. There are many who claim to have the gift of healing, but a quick comparison of the so-called healers of our day with the apostles will reveal some notable differences. The healings of the apostles were always complete and instantaneous and were never announced beforehand. And the apostles never failed in their attempts to heal. All of this is a far cry from what goes on with those who claim to have the gift of healing today.

b) Prophecy and Discernment

(1) Prophecy

In New Testament times, the gift of prophecy displayed several characteristics. Firstly, it was *verbal*, exactly as in the Old Testament period (cp. Num. 12:6-8; Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:16-18). Because it issued from the Spirit, prophecy was never inaccurate. Prophecy was also *authoritative*: the prophets were always able to speak in the spirit of ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ their human weaknesses not permitted to introduce mistakes (cp. 2:12-13). Prophecy was always *predictive*. Finally, prophecy always *unfolded something more about redemption through Christ*.

There has long been a difference of interpretation among evangelicals as to whether or not prophecy is a continuing, permanent gift or, like healings and miracles, passed away with the apostolic age. The primary argument for those who maintain it was a temporary sign gift—that it was a revelatory gift only, and therefore ceased when revelation ceased—is based on 1 Corinthians 13:8, where the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge all are referred to together as ceasing.

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The Greek verb (*prophēteuō*) behind ‘prophecy’ simply means ‘to speak forth, to proclaim.’ It assumes the speaker is before the audience and could mean ‘to speak publicly.’ God revealed a great deal of His Word through the prophets, but much of their ministry was simply proclaiming, expounding, and exhorting with revelation already given. The biblical prophets sometimes revealed (see 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Pe. 1:21) and sometimes only reiterated what had already been revealed. A prophet of God, therefore, is simply one who speaks forth God’s word, and ‘prophecy’ is the proclaiming of that Word. The gift of prophecy is the Spirit-given and Spirit-empowered ability to proclaim the Word effectively. Since the completion of Scripture, prophecy has no longer been the means of new revelation, but has only proclaimed what has already been revealed in Scripture. The simplest and clearest definition of this function is given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:3, ‘But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation’ (MacArthur).

Prophets and prophecy did not cease with the apostolic age, though God only raises up such inspired leaders occasionally (Barnett).

(2) Discernment

Perhaps the ‘ability to distinguish between spirits’ was a particularly contentious issue in Corinth. The emphasis Paul has laid on it in verse 3 of this chapter would indicate that some ecstatic utterances were not glorifying Christ as Lord, and so spiritual wisdom was needed in order to distinguish the false from the true. Given the pagan world of Corinth, the ‘discernment of spirits; of those involved in temple idolatry and mystery cults was an important ministry.

The basic meaning of ‘distinguishing’ has to do with separating out for examination and judging in order to determine what is genuine and what is spurious. All Christians should judge carefully what they hear and read and ‘not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God’ (1 Jn. 4:1; cp. Acts 17:11). The Corinthian believers who had this gift either were not using it or were being ignored. Otherwise the perverted ideas and practices that Paul deals with in this letter could not have flourished as they did.

Those to whom God has given the gift of discernment have a special ability to recognize lying spirits, and this gift is the Spirit’s watchdog. Some ideas that are given as scriptural and that on the surface *seem* scriptural actually are clever counterfeits that would deceive most believers. Those with the gift of discernment are the Holy Spirit’s inspectors, His counterfeit experts to whom He gives special insight and understanding. The gift was especially valuable in the early church because the New Testament had not been completed (MacArthur).

The gift of discerning spirits was tied to the gift of prophecy. When prophets declared the revelations they had received from God, the gift of discernment enabled those who had it to determine whether a prophet had truly spoken the Word of God or if they were uninspired utterances. When the gift of prophecy ceased, there was no need for the gift of discernment to continue.

c) *Tongue Speaking and Interpreting*

Glōssa, ‘tongue,’ is a functional synonym for *diaklektos*, whence ‘dialect’ or ‘language,’ and, as will be seen, also for *phone*, whence ‘phone’ or ‘voice.’ According to Acts 2:4-11, on the Day of Pentecost the disciples praised God in many foreign languages. This is shown by Luke’s employment of *heteros* in Acts 2:4, ‘other [= ‘different’] tongues.’ Further, each tongue was recognized by various individuals in the listening crowd as ‘his own language’ (*diaklektos*; Acts

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2:6, 8). Intelligible communication is emphasized by Acts 2:11, which reveals the people's judgment that they had heard their own tongues. In short, the apostles were speaking in understandable languages. Nor is there evidence to show that Pentecostal glossolalia was anything other than the gift of tongues experienced later at Corinth and elsewhere.

Astonishingly, this gift seems to have enabled its recipients to utter 'families' of tongues. Nor was it the case that somebody at Corinth was granted just one foreign tongue: he, rather than a cross section of the church, was given 'families' of languages (cp. Acts 2:7-11; 10:46; 19:6).

And then there was also 'the interpretation' of tongues. If one believer could speak at choice from a very wide range of unlearned languages placed at his disposal, another would be enabled to interpret each of them so that everybody could understand. The relevance of this gift is made plain in chapter 14.

The gift of tongues was the presenting issue inspiring Paul to write these chapters for the Corinthians. By allocating only two out of nine 'manifestations of the Spirit' (in 1 Cor. 12:8-10) to 'tongues speaking,' and by placing them at the end of the list, Paul firmly downgrades their importance and puts their use in a broader perspective for the Corinthians. Let the readers understand that there are more gifts than tongues, of which they were so enamored. Furthermore, it is the Spirit, not any Corinthian church member, who determines who will be given whatever gifts are given.

By 'tongues,' which he later qualifies as 'the tongues of men and of angels' (12:1), Paul is referring to ecstatic speech within the assembly. He is not referring to foreign languages like Latin, Greek, or Hebrew.

As with false prophecy, the same misuse can occur in the context of tongues, of course, a phenomenon often evidenced in non-Christian contexts-hence the need of the gift of interpretation.

The most controversial spiritual gift in our day is that of speaking in 'various kinds of tongues.' Because this gift, and that of 'interpretation of tongues,' will be discussed in detail in 1 Corinthians 14, it is necessary only to mention here that these are temporary sign gifts that are not genuinely active in the church today. Their ministry in the New Testament church was, like the other sign gifts, to validate the message and power of the gospel. They were disproportionately exalted and seriously abused in Corinth.

What about the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues? What evidence is there for saying they have ceased? We shall look more fully at these issues when we come to chapter 14. At this point, we should simply note two things: Paul always places these gifts very firmly at the end of his lists, and the later lists contain no mention of them at all. It would appear, then, that these gifts existed only in the early years of the church's life, that they gradually diminished, and finally ceased. The very fact that Christians down through the years have not even been able to agree on what the gift of tongues was indicates that the gift was lost early in Christian history.

C. Summarizing Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:29-31a)

1. A Diversity of Gifts (12:29-30)

²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

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The rhetorical questions all expecting the answer ‘No,’ come like a series of hammer-blows to nail beyond all dispute the principles the chapter has been expounding. The apostle’s teaching clearly denies the claim that any of the gifts can be ours if only we have the faith to claim them and exercise them. In that case, verses 29-30 would be irrelevant. It also denies the argument that *all* Spirit-filled Christians must exhibit one particular gift (usually tongues) as proof of their new birth.

A series of rhetorical questions brings this section to an end. The point is all the sharper when we note that Paul preceded each question with the small Greek word *mē*, which grammatically demands an answer, ‘No,’ to each question. So Paul proceeds down his list given in verse 28, omitting reference to ‘helpers’ and ‘administrations.’ Thus Paul reaffirms the diversity of gifts in the members of one body. Tongues speaking is, indeed, one such gift. But it is only one, and it comes at the bottom of the list.

It is interesting that the two gifts mentioned in verse 28 that are not mentioned in verses 29-30 are helps and administrations, probably the ones least prized by the Corinthians, but clearly the ones for which they had the greatest need.

‘Do all speak with tongues?’ Paul asks, without any hint of an exhortation that all should, any more than all should, or could, be apostles. Clearly, they did not and do not, so that the contrary teaching that concentrates on tongues as the necessary sign of the new life, is injurious to the body of Christ and destructive of its God-given unity. God does not intend for everyone to have the same gift, and He does not intend for everyone to have gifts that are out front and noticed.

We should avoid assuming that if we see a particular gift in some person, then this person will permanently have this gift. If the Spirit of God is sovereign in the giving of gifts, we should not be surprised to find that one brother or sister has the word of wisdom for one situation and another has the word of wisdom for another situation.

The main thing for us to carry away from Paul’s discussion of the gifts is that the Spirit of God is in charge. Instead of worrying about what gifts exist today and what our gift or gifts may be, we should simply concern ourselves with serving our Lord in as many ways as we possibly can. If we faithfully do this with the right spirit, we may rest assured our Lord will be pleased and our reward will be great.

2. Higher Gifts (12:31a)

³¹*But earnestly desire the higher gifts.*

‘Zeal’ for tongues was evidently a mark of some of the members of this congregation since later he observes that they are ‘zealous for spirits’ (14:12). But instead, Paul urges ‘zeal’ for ‘greater gifts,’ that is, in his list given in verse 28 above. The bottom of the list is tongues speaking, a gift for which Paul does not want them to be zealous. In chapter 14 Paul will sing the praises of prophecy while systematically showing up the deficiencies of tongues speaking.

Because *zēloō* (‘earnestly desire’) usually has the negative connotation of coveting jealously or enviously (but contrast 2 Cor. 11:2), and because the Greek indicative and imperative forms are identical, the first half of verse 31 could be translated, ‘But you earnestly desire the greater gifts.’ That rendering seems much more appropriate to the context, both of what precedes and of what follows. It certainly is consistent with the tone of the letter and the sin of the Corinthians. Because they clearly prized the showier gifts, the seemingly ‘greater gifts,’ it would seem foolish

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of Paul to command them to do what they already were eagerly doing. The Corinthians were to stop seeking gifts, because to do so is both presumptuous and purposeless. What they needed to seek was ‘a still more excellent way,’ the way of contentment and harmony that he has been exhorting in chapter 12 and the way of love that he is about to show them in chapter 13. These things they did not have but desperately needed.

Which gifts are ‘greater’? The probable meaning is that the ‘greater’ gifts are verbal gifts capable of being understood by all. This is supported by 14:1 and 14:39, which emphasize the usefulness of intelligible prophecy (cp. 14:3-4, 12, 22). In 14:19 Paul declares that he would prefer to speak five words so that the Corinthians might understand, rather than utter ten thousand which he alone comprehends.

The truth that all contributions are important does not deny the fact that some gifts are greater than others in their immediate and longer-term benefits to the church. Obviously, Paul’s own apostolic gifting was a greater gift to the Corinthian church than the tongues speaking of one of its members (see 14:19) in terms of its beneficial effect. We are here, today, still studying Paul’s apostolic teaching but the words of the Corinthian tongues-speakers have long since been buried in the dust of history. One is undeniably greater than the other. But that does not make Paul superior.

It is vital to see that the *charismata* are God’s gifts, in both their diversity and equality. They are designed to express unity to build up the body and to provide the church with the much-needed resources by which she lives out her confession that ‘Jesus is Lord.’ That sort of community will be characterized above all by one supreme virtue to which the apostle now turns, namely, love. Love, as he will next demonstrate, is the only true motivation for the exercise of gifts for others.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:7.